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On Style in Ornamentation.

By

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The term Ornamentation, taken in its widest acceptation, comprises every thing that art can add to any object beyond what is absolutely necessary for adapting it to its purpose. It is the mark of intelligence which man stamps on his productions, and which, though manifesting itself sometimes in simple and sometimes in luxuriant forms, is always founded on definite laws analogous to the laws of language. These laws may be divided into two great classes according as ornamentation in its general meaning, as defined above, looks either to the artistic construction of the parts which together constitute a work of art, or simply to its exterior decoration.

The task of the artist, in the formation of the constructive parts of a work of art is so to shape and connect all the details, as to cause the whole to develope itself as it were organically, and to express the original idea of the intended form in a clear and decided manner, just as in language a perspicuous sentence reproduces a thought. As speech is a peculiar mode of expression, absolutely distinguishing man's utterances from those of all other beings, so the work of man's hand is, primarily, something that has no direct model in all creation. To copy nature in its phenomena, for the purposes of art-industry, to borrow shells from marine animals, or even plants and flowers, and employ them without regard to aim and purpose, is as if a child, in order to express its feelings, were to make use of the sounds of animals, and dispense with human speech. But as language itself has enriched its vocabulary with a number of natural sounds, modifying and adapting them to the organs of speech, so far, and so far only, may the artist look for and employ the analogies of nature for his productions, without however chaining himself to them as direct models. The rush and roar of the wind, the trill of the lark, words imitating natural sounds, are examples for art to follow in her own province; and if a certain poet of old made himself ridiculous by substituting for the trill of the lark, which he thought too simple an expression, another word of his own, surely the artist would be no better off, who would seek from nature special instead of general models.

Every production of art, as something new, without any direct pattern in nature, we require to be made for some specifically human use, and at once clearly to indicate that use. Such objects as those colossal jugs, which in the last century were looked upon as masterpieces, and other gigantic pieces made simply for show, notwithstanding their excellent workmanship, will not be fully valued for their artistic importance until the world is peopled with giants who can make use of them. Lastly, every production of art must indicate its use clearly and distinctly, must, in a word, be rational. As in human language every word is made to convey a definite idea, so every object of art should represent one thought clearly and distinctly, a thought not arbitrarily conceived, but determined by the destination of the object itself. According to sacred history, the dispersion of nations took place at the building of the Tower of Babel, because their languages became so confused that they no longer understood one another. A similar confusion of language and ideas in art would also prove the beginning of its de-

cline. A vase which should represent something different, as for example, the figure of an animal or plant; a jug shaped like a horse; a cup like a human figure; a bedstead like a box; a salt-cellar like a slipper; a case for steel pens like a gadfly, and many other whimsical fancies, are monstrosities lacking any artistic stamp, and at best are only to be excused as artistical enigmas, and are never to be recommended for imitation. Assuredly the gift of speech was not entrusted to us in order that we should speak doubtful oracles or Sybilline riddles: on the contrary, the very first thing we demand of speech is that it express definite thoughts and clear ideas, and so we must demand the same requirement from art; clearness of form as the very first necessity, for the expression of its purpose. An exception might be made in the case of small fancy articles for the decoration of the mantlepiece, just as now and then a jesting word, a pun, or ridiculous conundrum may be introduced to enliven conversation.

Any creation is perfect, when the parts of which it consists are perfect. Any work of art is perfect by the perfection of its parts and by the organic relation in which these parts stand towards one another and towards the whole. The discourse of an orator can only be pronounced a work of art, if each separate sentence is correct in itself, correct in its relation to the others, and correct in its union with the whole. We might very appropriately give to the formation of the constructive parts of a work of art the name of artistic etymology and syntax; and, as in our schools, the Greek language can scarcely be given up as the most important element of education, so to every artist the Greek school of art is indispensable. Beyond all other nations the Greeks, both in their language and their art, have the clearest expression for every idea, and clothe this expression in the most perfect dress. No language equals the Greek in its power of expressing every delicate shade of thought in the clearest manner, and nowhere else has art produced in the single parts of a work such varied gradations in forms of expression which take account of the purpose and idea of the whole even to the most delicate details. However apparently similar in other respects their vessels may be, if one is intended to be carried on the head, and another to be placed on the ground, we may be sure that the artist has placed their centre of gravity above or below according to their destination; for the foot, neck, mouth and handle of the vessel, for its finish and crownpiece, for the supporting part, and the part to be supported, for closing and covering, the most fitting expressions have been found in the most artistic style, the study of which should always be the most zealous effort of our time.

Besides the simplest forms of expression for rendering an idea in a clear and perspicuous manner, art possesses also a figurative language analogous to the syntaxis ornata of grammarians, in tropes and figures, of which it has constantly made the most extensive use. This consists in availing itself of motives from animal nature in order to render an idea, simple and prosaic in itself, in an especially plastic manner. As the phrase "the earth thirsts for rain", is much more lively and picturesque, much more intuitively apprehended than the simple expression "the earth is dry"; as in the former idea, the earth is supposed to be endued with sensibility and intelligent power, and thus brought into closer approximation to man; so by the adoption of such motives from organic life will any vessel become a work of a higher classification, adapting itself to our various requirements. By attention to the peculiarities of animal forms of different kinds, a variety of expression may be imparted to the object itself, or it may be adapted to widely different purposes in the most interesting manner. For example, the foot supports, but according as I give to a piece of furniture the foot of the lion, deer, or gazelle, the degree of moveability intended is more distinctly expressed; the head is the finish, the crown, but according to the kind of head I may choose, the article will possess a variety of characteristic, from that of the deepest gravity to that of the highest pleasantry. In this application of plastic tropes, we must, however, remark, that only those motives should be selected from animal nature which serve exactly the same purpose, and that all individualising in detail should be renounced. A butterfly, as a handle to a coffeecup, is a combination most absurd, whereas, on the other hand, rich foliage, forming into clusters at the handle of a vase is of excellent style and produces a good effect.

Every language has its own laws, according to which it frames its sentences, and cannot without falling into disorder, adhere to those of another. So also every material has its own peculiar laws for its development, which must be respected and observed, else disorder will accrue. Forms peculiar to wood should not be reproduced in cast iron; stone should not be treated in the same way as wood or metal; iron garden chairs and benches should not have the same shape as those of cane and wood; wood-work should not have the appearance of leather; as well might any one in speaking some foreign language deck it out with all possible solecisms from his own and others.

The single parts of any work of art must be correct in themselves, and be in harmony with each other. Language has for the expression of ideas certain forms which, if partly changed, draw after them other changes as a necessary consequence. A hypothetical premiss must have a corresponding conclusion. Roof and support stand in just the same relation to each other. If one is altered, the other must be altered too. If the supporting wall of a building is replaced by slender, cast iron pillars, the roof supported by them must be changed in a manner corresponding with the altered supports: it must be resolved into compartments, must have panels corresponding in weight to the slender supports, and an elegant coffered ceiling and light perforated work instead of a dead flat surface.

Lastly, the several parts of a work of art must have an internal unity through those symbols which, like the particles and transition forms in language, from single sentences form periods and well constructed oratorical

master-pieces. The sometimes independent, sometimes dependent proportion of the parts, the degree of their dependence or independence, and their relations to each other must be strongly and firmly marked by appropriate forms, and hence arises that rhythmical movement, which, like a well composed chorale, flows on in clear-sounding harmony. The antique *Lyses and Apotheses, Kymes and Kymatiœ,* crowning pieces, and the great number of connecting members, are just as expressive and subservient to use as are the indispensable particles of speech for the expression of an idea, and present themselves to the educated artist as matters of course.

By such a formation of the constructive parts of a work of art, correct in themselves, correct in their relation to each other, and correct in their union, there will be produced a work, in harmony with the laws of style, and being the free creation of the hand of man, will express the use and purpose of its existence in a clear and intelligible way, and like speech itself, will be the expression of the intellect and genius of its originator.

Still more will this be the case if a pictorial or plastic decoration is added to the correctness of construction. Then, as in a song language rises into music, the work of art becomes a work of a higher order; it speaks forth its intent in artistic melodies which, though arising out of plastic or pictorial spheres, in their deepest origin belong to music: it thus becomes a musical creation, soundless indeed, but vibrating intelligently to the heart, a Memnonbust, as it were, which resounds not only to the salutation of Aurora, but without interruption for every one who possesses a mind capable of comprehending such a world of sound.

The completion of a work of art by plastic and pictorial decoration may perhaps spring from a very simple cause, the concealment, that is, of the imperfections of the structural form. As in the art of dress, it is the main rule of ornament to conceal natural deformities and to compensate for natural defects, rendering both less apparent to the eye, so in the decoration of works of art, the same practice may legitimately be used. If, for example, the woodwork of a frame is cut diagonally, a leaf placed over the joining place, will cover the crack which is so easily made by the shrinking of the wood. The Egyptians long ago made frequent use of this principle, as is seen by the round which at a later period, even in their stone structure so needlessly encircles the corners of their buildings; while in pottery, the difficulty of producing smooth glazed surfaces is known to have contributed to the employment of painting and plastic ornaments.

This is rather a prosaic purpose of the decorative completion of a work of art, but its importance for the whole is immense, if it serves not only to conceal defects but to set perfections in their due light, and to express the significance and intent of the constructive parts in richer and more ideal language. So far have we set forth the fundamental laws of decorative ornamentation; they are never to act independently of all else. As the musical accompaniment to a song must be throughout suited to the text and the sentiment, and as no one would think of calling that music which consisted in a piano being played in one place, and a song recited in another with no relation to each other, so must the decoration adapt itself most intimately to the constructive parts, nor can it without losing style and purpose, be diverted to any other distinct signification. For this reason it is that portraits, landscapes, genre pictures &c., are so out of place and style on vases and vessels, notwithstanding any excellence of execution; as are also, in great part, the well known majolicas with historical scenes, and above all the naturalistic representations of flowers and birds of all sizes, plumes, birdsnests, and fishes in washbasins and on jugs, and especially everything that stands forth independently without being justified by the construction. Let us compare our modern mode of decoration with the paintings on the vases of antiquity. The æra of their production beheld the greatest painters of old Hellas, not only Polygnot, but those masters of perspective and illusion, Parrhasios and Zeuxis and the divine Apelles. On all these antique vases there is no effect of light and shade, no perspective illusion, and that, not because it was unknown, but because sufficient appreciation of style was possessed to see that representations which the historical painter worked out in his grand picture with all the charms of illusion, must be very differently treated by the vase decorator as purely ornamental in subjection to the idea of the vessel, surrounding it like a wreath with flat ornament in bold outlines.

Besides this general and fundamental law for decorative ornamentation, there are others which may be considered as corollaries from it:

1. Every ornament must express an idea. Where that is wanting, the ornament is a bad and unintelligent composition. A mere cry is not music, and an ornament which is destitute of style in form and expression does not belong to the realm of Art-creations.
2. The idea, which the ornament has to express, is given through the functions and intents of the structural parts. The ornament is therefore the interpreter of this construction, it is a kind of hieroglyphic, by which the parts individually and collectively impart and reveal themselves to the spectator, relate to him their purpose, functions and destination, and this in a style corresponding to themselves, either humorously, seriously or indifferently. The foot of a vessel informs us in its decoration, my business is to support; the handle, mine is to hold, raise &c.: the surface, mine is to cover; the cornice, to crown; the pillar to sustain. Just as in the realm of music one and the same theme may run through a thousand different variations, so manifold also are the ways and means to express either by pictorial or plastic decoration in a clear and intelligent manner the functions and destinations of the constructive parts of a work of art. To suggest these by appropriate motives the ancients laid under contribution all the regions of universal

nature, from the productions of the most primitive industry, from weaving borrowing simple cords and bands, strings and ropes, plattings and mattings, from the vegetable world flowers and leaves, branches and boughs and roots of trees; from the animal world the characteristic types, making them subservient to their purpose; and we stand in astonished admiration before the rich variety of applications, which the simplest forms underwent at their hands. The acanthus leaf, for example, served for crowning piece, for filling up, and connecting, for contrast and finish, and according to the different forms it received in one or other application spoke almost every language of decoration, and each so clearly and distinctly that they could by no possibility be interchanged. The only position which the leaf could not take was that of the foot or support, since the very nature of the leaf opposes itself to such a function. This is also one of tho excellencies of ancient art, that however it divested the representations of the vegetable world of their individuality, it ever took into account their general structure, and attributed to them nothing out of nature. It would never have occurred to artists of old time to support a candlestick by volutes and wreaths of leaves, and as they had the conviction that every ornament was the expression of some thought, they would have supposed, if they were to see the street lamp-posts supported by no other pedestal than the foot of an animal, that it was the habit of our lamp-posts to walk about the streets in the evening. How effective, rational, and at the same time how spirited may be the adaptation of the animal kingdom to the decoration of objects of art, is shown by the Assyrian arms and appointments.

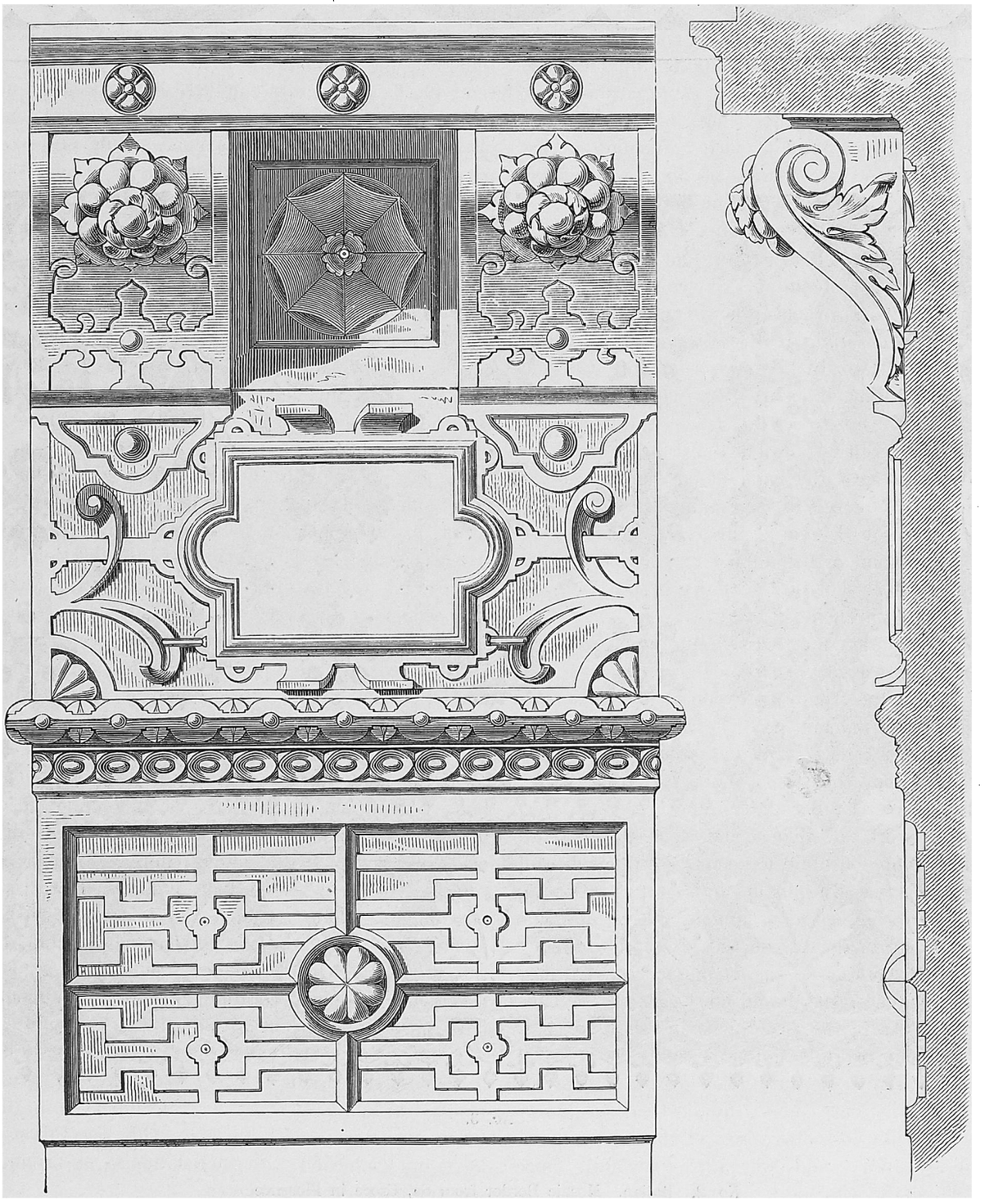
3. The ornamentation must arise naturally of itself and never appear forced; as from the fresh and true heart song is the truest expression of joy or sorrow so must the ornament proceed from the structure of the object, as if necessarily and spontaneously. Such was at one time the case. Who, on inspection of the antique vessels, does not at once see that they were the work of living and spontaneous conception? Who can fail to perceive this exuberant facility, and this continually new creative talent in the antique ornamentation, and in the greater part of the Italian majolicas of the sixteenth century? The stucco workers of the Renaissance, the glass artists of Venice, the immortal loggias of Raffael, and the works of the two Sansovini show us how the sentiment of style must incarnate itself in art creations. Truly we must take pains to learn the first rudiments once more, for lost artistic knowledge can, like lost discoveries of the past, be regained by study, and we may confidently hope that this study will not be in vain.
4. Lastly, the decoration of the several parts must have a rhythmical relation the one to the other, and bind together the whole harmoniously. The forte and piano must be considered in their right places, and the general effect must be adapted to the fundamental tone. A splendid example of this is the masterpiece of the Silver Hydria from the Hildesheim discoveries. The griffins on the ground, the coral trees with their buds, the cheerful sea hunt, all so natural, so self-derived and independent, adapting itself to the constructive forms like the play of the sunbeam; all this is perfect, inimitable art.

With this example of ancient art-industry we are led into a field which, more than any other, is the stumbling-block of dilettanti in art, namely symbolical decoration.

Symbolism bears the same relation to decoration, that wit and humour bear to society and life. In its right place, and rightly employed it is a powerful medium of expression, but it ought only to be used where all other conditions of style have been duly observed, and must be subordinate to the constructive forms; these the first consideration, then the corresponding decoration, and lastly the surplus of allusion and allegory. If, in general, the proper place for this kind of decoration is marked out, it must, in an especial manner, as we have before expressed ourselves, be natural and rational. As forced and inappropriate wit loses all its salt and becomes ridiculous, so does all symbolism, which does not express itself in a striking manner, and does not present itself naturally. A flower-vase, on which the whole mosaic cosmogony should be represented in pictorial or plastic style, beginning with the chaos and introducing all the after phases of creation, would be, as to any artistic result, in no proportion to the efforts that it necessitated. If a celebrated artist were to decorate the lock of a door with grave diggers and midwives such an attempt at wit, would at the very first sight, be seen to be destitute of common sense. If at Pompeii, the Triclinia and baths were decorated with the delicacies of the table, and other enjoyments, the connexion is understood. If at Augsburg the portraits of old families look down on the streets from the windows of the houses, as the originals did two hundred years before, this has some sense, but where would be the sense or the connexion of ideas in placing a couple of quarrelsome porters on the cover of a beerglass? If in gothic churches monks bearing consoles are represented with gestures drawn from the pantomime of their repeated exercices; or if on a pulpit, among other things a fox is delineated preaching to geese this might even be understood, but such examples show that symbolism in decoration, like wit and humour, must have its limit and purpose, must take account of time and place, must be gay with the gay, and serious and dignified with serious things. We have no pleasure in seeing the things of every day life intrude into the sanctuary, nor do we wish to meet with decorations which have any connexion with sacred things, as ornaments to our ordinary drinking glasses.

On the whole it may well be said: Let there by all means be a due moderation in this kind of decoration. Without it indeed no work of art can be perfect, and

how far this is the case is shown by those forms, which in these later times have become more than ever the object of the most serious study, namely, the industrial products of the Moslems and other Orientals, who indeed have but little symbolism, but for that very reason, more perception of style, and fewer dilettanti, who being incapable of composition in a correct style, fall into extravagancies which they fancy are proofs of genius.



No. 1. German Renaissance. Carved Stone Brackets from a House in Aschaffenburg, Bavaria.